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PLTs led: Light Equipment Platoon (10 Mo.); Light Engineer Platoon (13 Mo.)
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Can you say a little about your background? Where you grew up, what kinds of things you did, how you ended up an Army officer?

I'm the son of an Army Officer. So, I don't really have one home town, but my parents retired in Madison, AL, so that's kind of where I call home. Moving all over the country and some places outside of the country allowed me to gain an appreciation for travel, different cultures, and Army life. I love meeting new people and living in different places; so, when it came to choosing a profession, the Army was an obvious choice for me.

What were/have been some of your major experiences as a platoon leader?

Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC)

I'm going to start off this section with what JRTC is before I move into the actual experience because as a cadet and even as a young 2LT, I didn't even understand what JRTC was and why we had to go there. Prior to deployment, a units has to be "validated" at a Training Center to ensure it can function properly in an operational environment. A Training Center rotation is basically broken down into two sections (or at least it was for me at JRTC): Training Lanes; and "the Box." Training Lanes lasted about a week, and each lane was a separate mission and usually lasted about a day. From what I can remember, my Training Lanes consisted of Convoy Live Fire, Mounted Security Escort, Combat Convoy, Conduct a Joint Raid with an Afghan Element, Conduct a Key Leader Engagement, and Route Clearance. For the most part, each lane required a separate OPORD to be produced and briefed to the platoon. After Training Lanes, you move into "the Box." For me, this section lasted about 7 days, each day with a Route Clearance mission. "The Box" culminated with an AAR given by the lane walkers (OC/Ts, or observer controller trainers) who are with you for the entire JRTC rotation, grading your every move.

I moved from the Light Equipment Platoon to a Light Engineer Platoon about two months before we went to JRTC. Engineer Branch covers a wide range of missions, so when I went to BOLC, we didn't spend a ton of time covering Route Clearance. However, like many other Engineer platoon leaders, my platoon became a brigade-level asset as we became one of two Route Clearance Platoons within our Brigade throughout our JRTC rotation. I had learned a little about route clearance prior to JRTC as we had a virtual route clearance Mobile Training Team (MTT) at Fort Knox. However, I learned the most about Route Clearance on the fly at JRTC.

I don't think I've ever written more OPORDs in one week than during the Training Lanes week at JRTC. Each lane required a new OPORD, and we were on a new lane every other day. Thinking back on it now, though, it all seems like a blur. Before I knew it, we were on to "the Box" phase.

Each day in the Box was a separate Route Clearance mission. Now that I've been an RCP leader in Afghanistan, all of the IED Find and Clears missions at JRTC seem almost cookie cutter. We found something every day, which, as I'll describe in the next section, was definitely not the case in AFG. However, the JRTC training helped build muscle memory on tasks like: calling up an IED Find/Strike, requesting a blast window, and requesting a 9-Line MEDEVAC.

Deployment to Afghanistan

About three months after returning from JRTC, I found myself on an airplane bound for Afghanistan. I was a part of the Advanced Party, along with my Company XO and few other platoon leaders. We were going there a few weeks early to coordinate and organize some of the "mandatory" training for our Platoons at KAF [Kandahar Airfield]. I use mandatory very loosely because most of the training we were organizing was provided by contractors trying to sell their product or their organization and ultimately validate why they still needed to be in Afghanistan. Although they can be helpful and do have some helpful products, I've grown an intense hatred for contractors. Though, I can understand why they're still there…they get paid very well.

After leaving KAF and completing all of the mandatory training, I took a Chinook out to FOB Apache in Regional Command (RC) South. I went through the Relief in Place/ Transfer of Authority (RIP/ TOA) with the 3 ID unit we were replacing. This lasted about 7 to 10 days, which included a few ride alongs with the other platoon leader and looking at and signing for $13 million worth of property.

Finally, at the end of June, my platoon went out for the first time without any attachments from the previous unit. I was pretty excited to finally be out on my own. I double and triple checked to make sure I had all my gear and my mission book. You know, for how excited I was about the first mission, I

can't really recall what even happened on that first mission because nothing eventful occurred. That was kind of the theme for the whole deployment for me. If nothing really happened, it all kind of blended together into one big mission. In general, Zabul Province was pretty quiet. However, we did see some excitement.

After about two months of conducting route clearance, we finally saw something. My platoon was tasked to detect and reduce obstacles along Highway 1 and to secure a previous blast site while the Light Equipment Platoon filled in the hole. We left early in the afternoon with hopes of repairing the road at night so we didn't affect local traffic too much. We made it about 10 kilometers before my lead vehicle spotted a yellow jug with some yellow cord coming out of it. Saying something is an IED is a touchy statement because people kind of go crazy especially when the area was so quiet. So, I passed up to battalion that we had a possible IED and we cordoned off the area. EOD always traveled with us in the event that we found an IED. So, we sent them forward to conduct a further investigation. They checked the device out with a robot prior to conducting a remote pull. After further investigation (2 hours later), EOD found the device to be a hoax. So, we collapsed the cordon and continued mission. We traveled another 10 kilometers before we were flagged down by some members of the Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP). They told us they'd found a command wire about 10 kilometer ahead. So, they led us to the place of the command wire which, ironically, was the same blast hole we were going to repair. We cordoned off the area, and EOD moved forward. After identifying the command wire, EOD cut the command wire and requested that the Buffalo move forward. The arm operator dug for about 20 minutes without finding anything but loose soil. EOD then conducted an exploratory charge with a few blocks of C4. The Buffalo again moved forward and began digging. Almost immediately the arm operator called up that he found something. As he slowly raised the arm, he pulled up four yellow jugs and two Directional Fragmentary Charges (DFCs) all wired in series together with Det. Cord. EOD directed the arm operator to slowly lower and release the IED. I called in a 9-Line IED report and requested a blast window. Once the window was granted, EOD blew the IED in place and conducted a post blast analysis (PBA). The PBA allowed them to estimate the net explosive weight of the IED to be 450 pounds. After the PBA was complete, my platoon continued to secure the area while the blast hole was repaired. The remainder of the night went by without a hitch and we returned to base (RTB) the next morning.

Two days later, another Route Clearance Platoon went out along the same route. They struck an IED with a relatively similar net explosive weight. Unfortunately, the IED struck the platoon leader's vehicle almost directly under his seat, and he did not survive the injuries of the blast. I had talked to the platoon leader the night before he went out about the route because his platoon was relatively new to the area. You kind of feel invincible driving around in armored vehicles with mounted weapons, and it's extremely humbling to learn that you're still vulnerable.

My platoon went out again two days after the platoon leader was killed. We had about 70 kilometers to travel for this mission. We made it about halfway and stayed in a vehicle patrol base for the night. We left at first light the next morning and made it about 5

kilometers before my lead vehicle struck an IED. I can still vividly see the rising dust from the explosion and hear the blast like it just happened. Fortunately, the driver's radio still worked and he was able to let me know he was ok. I was just so happy to hear that little guy's voice on the radio. It made the situation so much easier. We cordoned off the area and recovered the vehicle and driver. I reported the strike up to battalion and let them know we didn't need any extra assistance. EOD conducted a PBA and determined the net explosive weight of the IED was 500 pounds. The driver was treated for mild Traumatic Brain Injury (mTBI), but ultimately he was ok.

After that strike, we didn't see anything really until the end of October. We had just returned from a four-day mission the day before, and we were called to recover an immobile and stuck SF vehicle about 75 kilometers away. We quickly prepared the trucks and headed out on mission. We made it to a small FOB about five kilometers away from the stuck vehicle. The vehicle was blocked in the west by a village with very narrow alleys and bridges that were not structurally sound. The terrain north of the vehicle was too rugged to gain access. Our only option was to gain access from the south. Under the cover of darkness in the early morning hours, we left to go recover the vehicle with my Route Clearance Platoon in the lead followed by a maneuver platoon, the battalion commander, and another SF team. The route we had to take was about 12 kilometers off an unimproved road. The terrain wasn't exactly smooth and there was a large obstacle—a large river bed with a restricted entrance and exit—that was in the middle of the route about five kilometers off the main route. Fortunately, we made it to the immobile vehicle without any trouble, and recovering the vehicle went extremely smooth. We started heading back in the late morning. We were about two kilometers away from the river bed when my lead vehicle struck an IED. There was so much dust out there that I didn't even see the dust from the explosion. In fact, I barely even heard it. The IED was very small and damaged only the rollers on the lead vehicle. After recovering the vehicle, I switched out the lead vehicle, and we continued mission. About five minutes later, one of the SF vehicles struck another small IED. The composition of the explosive was poor and it didn't explode. Rather, it burned out slowly like a very big emergency flare. As we were entering the riverbed, my primary interrogation vehicle for unimproved roads struck an IED blocking the entrance. As we were recovering the vehicle, one of the SF EOD members identified another IED. As he was attempting to render the device safe, it detonated almost directly on the EOD tech. As the dust settled, my 3rd squad leader, my platoon sergeant, and my medic moved to provide aid to the tech. Someone was watching out for that man that day because he did not sustain a single injury from the blast. Thankfully, we didn't have to call a MEDEVAC. Night was falling very quickly, so we decided to move into a patrol base while we recovered the damaged vehicle. As my PSG focused on recovery, I consulted my squad leaders in an effort to develop a plan to get out of the situation. We decided to attack each choke point slowly and deliberately as if each were a separate problem. But, we decided to wait until first light. At first light, we began searching the first choke point, the entrance to the riverbed. After about three hours, the SF Team volunteered to put their Afghan EOD team up front to look for IEDs. Before you think this is a crazy idea, this Afghan EOD team is extremely experienced and can often find IEDs without even using a detector. As soon as they moved to the riverbed, they identified another IED. Because they are Afghans, they don't have to

request a blast window and can quickly blow devices in place. They continued to hand clear the five kilometers to the main route with SF Team members and American EOD techs beside them. They ended up finding four additional IEDs as we moved to the main route. In total we found or struck 9 IEDs (4 strikes and 5 finds).

That was the last eventful mission before we left country.

What has been your toughest leadership challenge, and how did you address it?

My platoon sergeant was accused of hazing and was subsequently relieved for hazing and lying two months prior to our deployment to Afghanistan.

I had known this PSG while I was the Light Equipment Platoon Leader. However, I only worked with him for three months before he was relieved. He had a pretty aggressive and domineering personality, which can be intimidating to a 2LT. He had great situational awareness, and he didn't haze if I was around. The only real time I can say that I saw him lose his temper and border line haze someone was at JRTC. We were completing the rotation and packing up our container to send back to Fort Knox. He asked one of my E5's to bring him one of the platoon's stretchers. The E5 brought back one of the stretchers that was issued at JRTC. My PSG lost it in front of the entire platoon, the commander, and me. Thinking back, it probably would have been a good idea to take him aside then, but I waited until the next day. We sat down at lunch, and I printed out his initial counseling. When I was the Light Equipment Platoon Leader, I had used a very cookie-cutter type initial counseling for my platoon sergeant. This time I took some time (3 months) to observe his leadership style and consciously decide what my expectations were for him. Outside of my expectations, I let him know that yelling at and belittling Soldiers was ineffective and didn't inspire the platoon to follow him. It was probably the most effective way to handle the situation. And, it may have worked had the situation not been taken out of my hands. One of my Soldiers submitted an Inspector General (IG) complaint shortly after we got back from JRTC. After a relatively quick investigation, he was relieved.

His relief occurred about two months before deployment. His position was given to the most senior SSG in the company. Now, I had to take to war a platoon uninspired by their previous PSG and under the control of a brand new PSG. The impact that a PSG has on a platoon quickly became evident. This new PSG is an extremely effective leader and is, without a doubt, one of the reasons why my platoon was so successful in Afghanistan. We may not have had the highest Find and Clear rate, but his leadership style inspired the platoon, and he was able to achieve amazing results despite having not worked with my platoon very long prior to deployment.

What unit training have you conducted that you are most proud of? Describe your role in the process of planning and executing that training.

Advanced Close Quarters Marksmanship (A CQM) Training

I think the best training is conducted when the leadership is enthusiastic about the training. A CQM was a high priority for our battalion commander in preparation for deployment. My platoon sergeant and I came up with an idea for a competitive stress shoot utilizing A CQM skills. The first part of the range week, we ran each company in the battalion through A CQM. On Friday morning, we ran my company through the A CQM stress shoot. The targets were balloons, which provided immediate feedback for the engagement of a target. The Soldiers loved the training, and it all culminated with a company BBQ. It was the most rewarding training, not only because it was quality training but also because the Soldiers enjoyed the entire event—from A CQM to the BBQ.

Can you tell us about your relationships with your NCOs? What are some things about working with NCOs that you've learned through experience?

As I discussed earlier, sometimes it's necessary to outline expectations in formal counseling for NCOs to take you seriously. However, more often than not, my NCOs appreciated a candid verbal discussion over a formal sit down. It definitely is a challenge establishing a clear boundary between being their friend and being their boss, especially because you'll often times be their senior rater (at least for your squad leaders).

It's probably very ineffective to be the new guy that comes in with no combat patch and zero experience and says something like this: "I don't care who you are or how things ran in the past, but this is my platoon now." They're going laugh at you and you won't be able to get a single thing done. The more effective approach is to learn from their experience. They didn't pin on those chevrons and rockers by accident. NCOs actually know what they're doing and are really good at it. I don't think there was a decision I made on deployment or in garrison without consulting my PSG or at least one of my SLs. They saw that and appreciated that I took their experience into consideration. Referring back to the paragraph above when I was discussing the IED belt we were stuck in overnight: I definitely didn't come up with the plan to get out of the situation on my own. I came over the platoon net and talked to the squad leaders, and we came up with an effective plan to get the element out and resolve our problem. I didn't really care that the entire element, to include the battalion commander, was on the net. It showed that I cared what my NCOs had to bring to the table. When it came time to let my company and battalion commander know my plan, they knew I had developed a solid plan of action based on analysis and recommendations from my team. And that's just it; we were a team. We had a mutual respect for one another. They knew who "made the decisions." Sure, I was the one who voiced the decision, but I didn't make it alone.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with the next generation of LTs?

- Learn how to write NCOERs and Awards. My first NCOER took me several hours to write, and it was definitely not perfect. Make sure you get NCOERS and Awards Recommendations done early and have the 1SG look at them. I probably wrote this because I'm writing them now.

- Compile example awards and NCOERs so you don't have start from scratch.